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## "I can do it" and you can, too : toddlers and autonomy in a multicultural classroom

Chelssi Lynn Michelle Parrott  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## "I can do it" and you can, too : toddlers and autonomy in a multicultural classroom

### **Abstract**

This article will define autonomy and its relationship to learning and development in an infant or toddler classroom. It will discuss the differing cultural views concerning autonomy and the challenges this can bring to a culturally diverse classroom. It will give examples of what the development of autonomy looks like in my own classroom, and I will also share the guidelines that I keep in mind when encouraging autonomy with infants and toddlers.

"I CAN DO IT" AND YOU CAN TOO: TODDLERS AND AUTNOMOY IN A  
MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

A Journal Article

Submitted to the

Division of Early Childhood Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Chelssi Lynn Michelle Parrott

July 2009

This Journal Article by: Chelssi Parrott

Titled: I Can Do It and You Can Too: Toddlers and Autonomy in a Multicultural Classroom

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Charles R. May

7-16-09

Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Faculty Reader

Jill M. Uhlenberg

7-16-09

Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Faculty Reader

Jill M. Uhlenberg

7-16-09

Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

## ABSTRACT

This article will define autonomy and its relationship to learning and development in an infant or toddler classroom. It will discuss the differing cultural views concerning autonomy and the challenges this can bring to a culturally diverse classroom. It will give examples of what the development of autonomy looks like in my own classroom, and I will also share the guidelines that I keep in mind when encouraging autonomy with infants and toddlers.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### *Description of Topic*

In this article, I defined autonomy and its relationship to learning and development in a toddler classroom. I discussed the views that different cultures have toward autonomy, and the challenges this can bring to a culturally diverse classroom. I gave examples of what the development of autonomy looks like in my classroom.

Erik Erikson (1963) developed eight stages of emotional development, one of which is autonomy versus shame and doubt. In this stage Erikson believed that children need to develop a sense of independence from their caregiver and to do things on their own. Erikson (1963) wrote that this stage occurs between approximately 18 months and 3.5 years.

Trawick-Smith (2003) described autonomy as “. . . a feeling of individuality and uniqueness apart from his or her parents” (p. 46).

Why is autonomy so important? Kamii (1982) stated that autonomy in both thinking and behavior is the most important disposition for later learning and development. In addition, Trawick-Smith (2003), said that children will, as preschoolers, “. . . wish to create, to invent, to pretend, to take risks, and to engage in lively and imaginative activities with peers” (p. 47). Consequently, when children are encouraged to do things on their own, they gain a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and increased self-esteem.

#### *Rationale*

I am writing this article because there are many different views on the importance of developing autonomy at a young age; many views stem from the cultural backgrounds of parents and teachers. Some cultures support autonomy, and others support connectedness



(i.e., independence vs. interdependence). I encourage both autonomy and connectedness in my toddler classroom (12-24 months) by giving children the opportunity to participate in self-help activities in a social setting. These activities include feeding, sleeping, self-care, play, physical development, and a variety of other activities. This article can help early educators understand different cultural approaches to developing autonomy in infants and toddlers, and to learn how we as early educators can support these differences.

#### *Purpose of Article*

The purpose of this article was to present educators with a general overview of how different cultures perceive autonomy in infants and toddlers. It provided examples of these cultural differences and discussed ways to implement and support various views of autonomy through the development of both independent and interdependent behaviors. When early educators are knowledgeable of cultural views they will be able to show how they encourage autonomy, while supporting these views, in their own classrooms.

#### *Importance of Article (How will this benefit the field?)*

This article will benefit the field of early childhood education by providing early educators research-based knowledge of how some cultures view autonomy and support either independent or interdependent behaviors. It will help educators view autonomy from a cultural perspective. Also, it will demonstrate what autonomy looks like in my infant/toddler classroom, which is based upon the belief that developing autonomy at a young age is important; however, autonomy needs to be seen from the context of cultural sensitivity.

## *Terminology*

**Autonomy:** Erik Erikson (1963) developed eight stages of emotional development, one of which is autonomy versus shame and doubt. In this stage, Erikson believed that children need to develop a sense of independence from their caregiver and begin to do things on their own. He stated that this stage occurs between approximately 18 months and 3.5 years.

Trawick-Smith (2003) described autonomy as “. . . a feeling of individuality and uniqueness apart from his or her parents” (p. 46).

**Independence:** Raeff (2006) defined independence as “. . . self-directing, pursuing individual goals, expressing individuality, conceptualizing oneself as separate from others and enhancing self-esteem” (p. 102).

**Interdependence:** Raeff (2006) defined interdependence as “. . . conformity, maintaining social cohesion, dependence, respecting others, valuing relationships, and conceptualizing oneself in relation to others” (p. 102).

**Mainstream:** Merriam-Webster Dictionary defined mainstream as “a prevailing current or direction of activity or influence” (1989, p. 441)

**Scaffolding:** Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (2007) defined scaffolding as “This term comes from Jerome Bruner and fits with the theory of Lev Vygotsky. To scaffold, adults keep a constant eye out for a child who is in a situation in

which there is a potential for learning. The adult sensitively structures that situation so that problem solving is encouraged and supported” (p. 16)

## CHAPTER 2

### Methodology

#### *Method to write and submit an article*

I began my research with infants and toddlers with the intention of writing a literature review. After spending some time searching for research-based studies, I found that there was a lack of articles that specifically addressed infants and toddlers. I then decided to change my paper option from a literature review to writing a journal article. After considering several ideas related to infants and toddlers, I decided to address the topic of autonomy. I made my decision based on my passion for promoting autonomy in the infant and toddler classroom. As I shared my ideas about the topic with my center director, she encouraged me to add the multicultural aspects, which I thought was interesting and important to the topic.

After choosing to write an article, I then started looking at various early childhood journals such as *Young Children (YC)*, *The Voice*, and *Childcare Exchange*. I chose to submit my article to *The Voice* because their criteria and audience more closely matched the content of my article. The audience for this journal is composed of teachers, directors, faculty members, and administrators of campus children's programs.

#### *Guidelines*

According to *The Voice* guidelines “. . . it seeks to advance the field of early childhood care and education by providing an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to integrate theory and research findings with teaching and daily practice. It is designed to provide its audience with up-to-date information regarding the application of child development, early childhood education, family support, and teacher education principles

and concepts to campus settings” (See Appendix A).

My article is relevant for teachers, childcare providers, and child development program administrators. It meets the guidelines used for submission in the following ways: looking at the current knowledge base through reading articles on autonomy, sharing examples of how I use autonomy in my classroom and at our center, providing strategies on dealing with autonomy and different cultural views, and discussing the roles culture and ethnicity play in autonomy. This article would also be a good resource for teachers to share with parents when they have questions and concerns on issues dealing with autonomy.

#### *Approval from Advisor*

I have been meeting with my first reader, and in class with another professor. I continued to meet with my first reader until I received approval for my journal article.

#### *Gather Data*

Gathering data was a very interesting process. I found in my search for articles, for the most part, two types of articles. The first type, research-based studies, was very difficult to read and understand, but as I reread them I was able to find information that was beneficial to my search. Most of these articles came from the *Human Development Journal*. From it, I collected statistical information, as well as some knowledge on what research has been conducted on my topic. The second type of articles, instructional articles, were easier to read with information directly relating to parenting or classroom uses. Both types of articles contained information connecting my topic to different cultural views. When searching for articles in the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, I found that the same articles would show up when I used terms such as *autonomy, independence, expectations, and capabilities*.

The terms that I used for my search, which resulted in the most helpful articles, were the following: *independence, autonomy, and culture*.

### *Writing Process*

After locating articles to review, I grouped them into three categories: articles with cultural information, articles with parenting information, and articles with general information on autonomy. While reading these articles, I highlighted quotes that I wanted to incorporate, and I labeled these quotes according to my categories.

Within my journal article I defined autonomy and its relationship to learning and development in a toddler classroom. I discussed the views that different cultures have concerning autonomy and the challenges that are associated with culturally diverse classrooms. I also gave examples of what the development of autonomy looks like in my classroom.

### *Method to discriminate what was included/eliminated*

Finding articles that were focused in early childhood, especially infants and toddlers, and autonomy or independence was my main method of discrimination. There were very few articles to choose from on the topics of autonomy and infants and toddlers. I also sought information that would discuss the importance of autonomy across a variety of cultures. This area also had limited information. I was able to find two studies that provided good background information on my topic. I also found articles that were directly related to the development of autonomy, to parenting, or the classroom by providing examples of autonomous behaviors and what parents can do to support them.

## CHAPTER 3

### Journal Article

#### *Introduction*

As early educators, we know that there are many views about best practices for young children. We also know that each and every one of the families in our classrooms have unique parenting styles and beliefs about child rearing and child development. As a teacher of one and two year olds, I have found that the development of autonomy accounts for the majority of our daily struggles and accomplishments in a toddler classroom. Walking into my classroom on any given day, you will observe many *proud little faces* when the children have been allowed to hang their coats up by themselves, or create their own block tower; however, you would also hear many shouts of NO or MINE echoing across the room. These are the sounds of autonomy as expressed by toddlers.

Within this article I will define autonomy and its relationship to learning and development in a toddler classroom. I will discuss the differing cultural views concerning autonomy and the challenges this can bring to a culturally diverse classroom. I will also give examples of what the development of autonomy looks like in my classroom.

#### *What is autonomy?*

Erik Erikson (1963) developed eight stages of emotional development, one of which is autonomy versus shame and doubt. In this stage, Erikson stated that children need to develop a sense of independence from their caregivers and begin to do things on their own. He recognized that this stage occurs between approximately 18 months and 3.5 years. Trawick-Smith (2003) described autonomy as “. . . a feeling of individuality and uniqueness apart from his or her parents” (p. 46). Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (2007) described autonomy

or independence as the stage when “. . . babies grow and begin to take over their care-giving by learning self-help skills” (p. 98).

Adult/infant interactions that encourage independence begin with eye contact. Eye contact is the first form of communication that infants can begin to control. They can choose to look away or choose to interact. When adults interact with this behavior they allow the infant to experience causality which in turn promotes the infant's separation from a caregiver (Keller, 2003). During infancy, children do not realize that they are separate from their caregivers or peers. This can be observed when infants (age 6-12 months) are beginning to sit at a table with a group of other children at mealtime. They do not understand that they have their own space, own cup, own meal. They are reaching for and exploring whatever they can touch. As infants grow into toddlers, around 12 months, mealtime will begin to look different. They begin to realize that the plate of food in front of them is theirs, and the plate next to them is not. They are starting to understand where their bodies end and someone else's begins. They are gaining a sense of self apart from others or the beginning of independence.

Why is autonomy so important? Kamii (1982) stated that autonomy in both thinking and behavior is the most important disposition for later learning and development. When toddlers develop a strong sense of autonomy, they will as preschoolers, “. . . wish to create, to invent, to pretend, to take risks, and to engage in lively and imaginative activities with peers,” Trawick-Smith (2003, p. 47). When children are encouraged to do things on their own, they gain a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and increased self-esteem. Izumi-Taylor (2008) said that “. . . autonomous children show initiative, empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving skills” (p. 76).



According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) position statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (2009) teachers should set "... challenging and achievable goals" (p. 10) for children. In relation to developing autonomy in a toddler classroom, I believe that this means giving children the opportunity to do things on their own and work on becoming more independent.

*Cultural views on the development and importance of autonomy*

NAEYC's position statement on DAP stressed three areas of knowledge early educators should consider when making decisions for their classroom and for their children. These three areas are the following: "1. what is known about child development and learning . . . , 2. what is known about each child as an individual . . . , and 3. what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live . . ." (p. 9-10). This is where encouraging the development of autonomy in a classroom can get a bit tricky. What we know about child development and learning and the ideals that are valued in societies around the world are different. Many toddler classrooms today have cultural diversity in some form or another; with this diversity, there are varied expectations for the development of autonomy.

One example of the varying cultural expectations is shown by the differing views parents have about sleeping arrangements for infants and toddlers. According to Klein and Chen (2001),

... mainstream families' push for independence is in the practice of placing very young babies in their own bed, often in a room separate from the parents. In many cultures this is unheard of, and would be tantamount to child abuse. (p. 80)

Another example is shown when discussing feeding. Klein and Chen (2001) observed the following:

...mainstream babies are weaned very early, relative to most other cultures. They are encouraged to begin finger feeding even though they do not have the necessary motor skills and are very messy. While most mothers consider food in children's hair (and eyes and nose) to be repugnant, mainstream mothers are less concerned by it if the child is learning to feed himself. (p. 80)

When reviewing the literature, I found that cultural beliefs supporting the development of autonomy vary from either supporting independent behaviors to supporting interdependent behaviors, or a combination of these behaviors. Raeff (2006) defined independence as "... self-directing, pursuing individual goals, expressing individuality, conceptualizing oneself as separate from others and enhancing self-esteem" (p. 102). He also defined interdependence as "... conformity, maintaining social cohesion, dependence, respecting others, valuing relationships, and conceptualizing oneself in relation to others" (p. 102). I believe that early educators in culturally diverse classrooms can help children develop both independent and interdependent behaviors, thus supporting each child's individual development of autonomy.

#### *Developing autonomy in my classroom*

As I observed my own classroom, and reflected on how I encourage the development of autonomy, I realized the need for the following five guidelines:

1. Develop a secure and trusting relationship with the child and family.

The children must feel safe and comfortable before they can begin to experience autonomy. Honig (2003) stated, "Babies must learn to trust and depend on their parents and teachers before they can learn true independence" (pg. 25). The teacher on the other hand, must create this relationship in order for the children to live and work together in a peaceful and productive climate. It is important for teachers to keep open daily communication with parents and families. This will help families to be comfortable with teachers and vice versa. This can be done through daily sheets, verbal communication, email, blogging, and keeping parents *in the know* on the daily happenings and being able to provide them with specific information can help develop this trusting relationship.

## 2. Recognize each individual child's capabilities.

This is probably the most difficult guideline to follow. I believe there are lots of teachers and parents who overlook a child's capabilities because they still are viewing them as babies, and are not ready to let go and watch them grow into children. The only way to learn what a child is capable of doing is to let him or her try to do things on their own in a safe environment. When you do this, the child will begin to gain a sense of autonomy and independence. I found that, as the children become more autonomous, it can make life easier for you, as well. One great example of this can be seen at mealtime in my classroom. As soon as children are able to walk they are encouraged to clean up after themselves at mealtime. Each child is expected to take his or her cup, plate, and fork to a plastic tub that is located by the garbage. We begin encouraging this by directly walking the child to the dish tub. As they become more capable, they can do it with less assistance. This process continues and we encourage the children to scrape their food into the garbage, and then put the dishes in the

tub. Each child in my classroom of children, age 12-24 months, has different expectations for cleaning up after mealtime, depending on his or her capabilities.

### 3. Set simple, consistent rules or limits.

Autonomy and independence can get out of hand if rules or limits are not set. It is important to remember that you are still the adult and should be in charge of the classroom. Autonomy can be developed even when there are rules in place. Autonomy does not mean that children are doing what they please. It means that they are learning to do things on their own, and rules must be followed. It is important that the teacher implement these rules with consistency. When children know what to expect, they become more autonomous. They will soon be able to follow the simple rules with less teacher intervention. One rule that I have in my classroom is that: children need to be sitting at the table while eating. This rule is implemented for three reasons: the first being safety due to choking hazards, the second maintaining cleanliness in the classroom, and the third to encourage socially acceptable mealtime manners. I implement this rule by asking the child to sit back down if he or she stands up while eating. I would say “you are showing me that you are done eating when you stand up.” I will then help the child sit back down in his or her chair. If they are unable to comply I ask them to take their dishes to the tub. I sometimes need to help them with this task if they are upset. After a couple of times, they learn that they need to sit when they are eating, and that they can control how long they choose to eat and when they are finished.

### 4. Set high expectations.

This will enable teachers to facilitate autonomy and independence. Sometimes children would prefer to take the easy route and as a result, they don't do things that are within their capabilities. When a teacher sets high expectations, and encourages children to

meet them, he or she is scaffolding the children's development of autonomy and independence. Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (2007) defined scaffolding as "... adults keep a constant eye out for a child who is in a situation in which there is a potential for learning. The adult sensitively structures that situation so that problem solving is encouraged and supported" (p. 16).

5. Seek to create a balance between independent and interdependent behaviors.

This will ensure that teachers are creating a culturally sensitive environment which will aid in the development of well-rounded children. We want children to be independent and capable, but we also want them to respect others, show signs of social conformity, and maintain a healthy balance between independence and interdependence as defined by Raeff (2006). Often there is some discrepancy between parent expectations and teacher expectations. I try to find a balance of these expectations through communication with parents. At the beginning of the school year we have a parent orientation where I explain teacher expectations and why this is important in our classroom. We also meet with parents twice a year for conferences. Here, we are able to discuss this topic and work together to try to create similar expectations.

Independent and interdependent behaviors are encouraged in my classroom through play. In my classroom I do not insist that the children share or take turns with toys. Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (2007) stated, "Children who have no sense of possession can't understand the concept of sharing. Children who have some sense of possession still may not be ready to share" (p. 239). Children in my classroom may play with a toy until they are finished with it. This freedom supports independence for the child with an object. This gives the child uninterrupted time to experiment and learn according to their individual goals. The

child who wants the toy is practicing interdependence because they are encouraged to respect their peers' actions and wait until others are finished, or choose a different toy (with young children who are just learning these concepts, it does help to have multiples of popular toys). In an environment that overstresses sharing, especially at an early age when children are not developmentally ready for it, children may, according to Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer "... learn to stay uninvolved rather than face the pain of being constantly interrupted and sidetracked" (p. 239).

### *Conclusion*

The following conclusions were drawn from this article. These important ideas are summed up in these concluding statements.

1. The development of autonomy in the toddler years has a direct correlation to children's behavior and development in their preschool years.
2. When children are encouraged to do things on their own, they gain a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and increased self-esteem.
3. Some cultures support independent behaviors, while others support interdependent behaviors. Teachers are capable of supporting both through their daily activities and interactions in the early childhood classroom.
4. The following five guidelines can assist teachers on how to encourage autonomy, independence, and interdependence in the classroom: 1. Develop a secure, trusting relationship with each child and family; 2. Recognize each individual child's capabilities; 3. Set simple, consistent rules or limits for the child; 4. Set high, but realistic expectations for the child; and 5. Seek to create a balance between encouraging independent and interdependent behaviors.

“It is important to realize that the mainstream values of children’s talkativeness and autonomous language skills, independence, and rapid development . . . are relatively unique when compared to many other cultures” (Klein & Chen, 2001, p. 81).

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## CHAPTER 4

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### *Conclusions*

It was interesting to read the different articles and research on autonomy. This background information led me to look at my classroom in a different way. It also helped me reflect on my teaching practices, and to define the five guidelines that may help other educators encourage autonomy in infant and toddler classrooms.

#### *Identify and Synthesize Insight About Topic and Writing*

Before beginning my research on the topic of autonomy, I thought that I solely supported autonomy and independence in my classroom. As I read the articles on this topic, I found that throughout my classroom's daily activities, I do take a cultural approach to autonomy. I do support both independent and interdependent behaviors, which in turn support various cultural expectations. I was not aware of the underlying cultural norms that go along with independence and interdependence. Both are very important, and I enjoy seeing how different activities and routines are able to support both sets of behaviors.

#### *Recommendations*

Encouraging autonomy and creating a balance between supporting independent and interdependent behaviors in the early childhood classroom can be difficult. Teachers need to be aware of each child's constantly changing abilities, both mental and physical, and be able to scaffold appropriately. This means that the teacher will have to give up some control and begin to let children try tasks or activities on their own, even if the task is not done in the same way as that teacher thinks is necessary. It is also very important that teachers be aware of the children's family background. Teachers need to know and respect the cultural

expectations of the family, while keeping them educated on the expectations of the classrooms and the reasons that those expectations are set.

### *Future Writing/Research*

Writing this article was a great way for me to reflect on my own teaching strategies and beliefs and share the research that I found with other early childhood professionals. I wrote a letter (see APPENDIX B) to the editor of *The Voice*, requesting the submission of my article to their journal. This opportunity would be a great way for me to share my research with early childhood professionals.

I would be interested in doing more research on how different cultures view the development of autonomy in early childhood programs in the U.S. I would like to become an active advocate for encouraging autonomy and independence in infant and toddler classrooms. I could accomplish this by presenting at national and state conferences and completing more in depth research on the topic specifically relating to infants and toddlers.

### *Educational Practices of Self and Others*

One way that I could improve my educational practices would be to document more formal observations on autonomy across various cultures and with infants and toddlers. I would like to observe and document practices in other centers and those implemented by other teachers. My current belief is that many infant and toddler teachers do not encourage autonomy to the extent that could be beneficial to children. I also think that it would be a good idea to create a parent pamphlet on this topic. The pamphlet could include information on how parents and other family members can support autonomy at home across ages, as well as information about the activities and expectations that we practice at school.

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## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX A

*The Voice* Submission Guidelines Letter

National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers  
 University of Northern Iowa  
 Price Laboratory School #114E  
 Cedar Falls, IA 50614-3593  
 Phone: 319-273-3113  
 Fax: 319-273-3109  
 www.campuschildren.org  
 lisa.orsborn@uni.edu

Dear Colleague,

A journal is now sponsored by the National Coalition of Campus Children's Centers. The intended audience for *The Voice: The Journal for Campus Children's Centers* is teachers, directors, faculty members and administrators of campus children's programs.

*The Voice: The Journal for Campus Children's Centers* seeks to advance the field of early childhood care and education by providing an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to integrate theory and research findings with teaching and daily practice. It is designed to provide its audience with up-to-date information regarding the application of child development, early childhood education, family support, and teacher education principles and concepts to campus settings.

*The Voice: The Journal for Campus Children's Centers* is published 3 times yearly, distributed to members online on the Member's Only page of the NCCCC Website ([www.campuschildren.org](http://www.campuschildren.org)).

The submission deadlines are as follows:

Spring Journal . . . . . March 31st  
 Summer Journal . . . . . May 15th  
 Winter Journal . . . . . October 1st

Material intended for publication should be addressed to Candice York, Editor; University of Northern Iowa Child Development Center, 1901 Campus Street, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0611. Electronic submissions are encouraged and should be sent to [candice.york@uni.edu](mailto:candice.york@uni.edu). *Documents should be approximately 2000 words in APA style. Pertinent tables, illustrations and photographs may be included. A brief biographical sketch of the author must also be attached.*

Please consider submitting any materials that you think would benefit our members. We look forward to receiving your submissions, and would be happy to assist you with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Lisa A. Orsborn  
 NCCCC Program Coordinator



**APPENDIX B****Letter of Submission to Editor**

2623 Terrace Dr. #9  
Cedar Falls, IA 50613

July 8, 2009

Ms. Candice York, Editor  
University of Northern Iowa Child Development Center  
1901 Campus Street  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0611

Dear Ms. Candice York:

I am submitting my manuscript "I CAN DO IT" and You Can Too: Toddlers and Autonomy in a Multicultural Classroom to the NCCCC publication of *The Voice*. This article discusses autonomy and how it can be encouraged in the classroom with a multicultural approach.

One of my main focuses as a toddler teacher is to encourage autonomy to the best of my ability. I try to give children every opportunity possible to try to do things on their own and become independent beings. I believe that by encouraging these behaviors children gain a sense of accomplishment, ownership and increased self-esteem. Before reading articles pertaining to this topic I did encourage autonomy but not with a multicultural perspective in mind. My research helped me better understand autonomy while taking into consideration various cultural beliefs on this topic.

I have been involved in NCCCC for the last four years. I have presented at and attended past conferences. I have also worked in the University of Northern Iowa evening program which was sponsored by a NCCCC grant. It would be an honor to have my article published in the NCCCC publication of *The Voice*.

Sincerely,

Chelssi L. M. Parrott

Enclosures